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SUBJECT: ACTING ARMENIAN PATRIARCH HOPEFUL FOR RETURN OF PROPERTY

REF: 08 ISTANBUL 574

¶1. (SBU) Summary. During a January 22 courtesy call by Ambassador Jeffrey, acting Armenian patriarch Archbishop Atesyan emphasized that the Armenian Turkish community is encouraged by the warming of relations between the Government of Armenia and the Government of Turkey (GOT). Atesyan noted that the most challenging issue facing the Armenian community is the return of foundation properties confiscated by the GOT over the past 90 years and expressed hope for the return of over 250 properties after August this year. He remained hopeful that Turkey will join the EU, allowing for what he perceives as a greater recognition of his community's rights. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Ambassador Jeffrey conveyed his regards for the ailing Patriarch Mesrob II to acting Armenian patriarch, Archbishop Atesyan. Atesyan explained that the Patriarch still lives in the Patriarchate and is taken outdoors for several hours each day. (Ref).

¶3. (SBU) Atesyan described the Patriarchate's relationship with the AKP as close, explaining that because they are a religious party they understand one another. The Grand Muftu of Istanbul often visits the Patriarchate, Atesyan noted, and the GOT continues to listen to the concerns of the Patriarchate and work actively to solve problems. The most significant problem the Patriarchate faces is the return of properties confiscated by the GOT over the past 90 years, he said, and they have petitioned for the return of more than 300 properties. Of this number, the GOT has returned 50, and Atesyan said the Armenian community foundations have until August to submit the full list of requested properties (to the General Directorate of Foundations). He contended that the foundations will petition the European Court of Human Rights if the GOT fails to return the properties in August. Atesyan emphasized the importance of income-earning property for the maintenance of Armenian schools and hospitals, pointing out that until 1970 the Turkish Armenian community operated 30 schools. Of these, the community had to close 16 due to the impact of property confiscation on its income earning capabilities and because some Armenian families chose to send their children to other schools. The remaining 14 schools instruct 3,500 students he said.

¶4. (SBU) Archbishop Atesyan expressed hope that Turkey will soon become a member of the European Union. "At that time we will be free and be able to get all of our rights." Responding to the Ambassador's comment about U.S. and European Union efforts to encourage the GOT to further amend Turkish Penal Code Article 301, Atesyan lamented, "Even if they change Article 301, their mentality has not been changed." However, he acknowledged the Ambassador's positive

comments on President Gul's trip to Armenia for a soccer match, and said the Armenian Turkish population is encouraged by the warming of relations between the Government of Armenia and the Government of Turkey. Atesyan noted that the Armenian Diaspora is not in favor of these developments, and stressed that the Armenian Turkish community has a different attitude toward April 24 and is ready to move beyond "the bad events of 1915."

Wiener